Mystical Myanmar by motorcycle

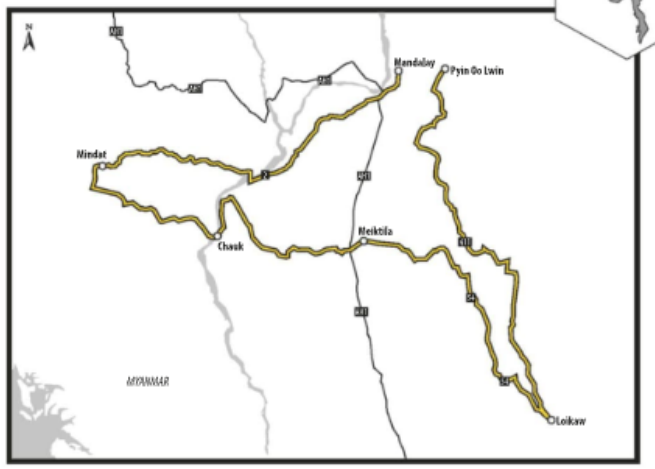
Living in South Africa offers many advantages for an adventure motorcyclist, but sometimes one craves something completely different. Myanmar in Southeast Asia is definitely different, says **Johan de Villiers** from Melkbosstrand.

Johan de Villiers and his wife Kim Rew-De Villiers are seasoned motorcyclists with numerous off-road races under their belts. They have toured through several African countries including Botswana, Zambia, Namibia, Tanzania and Rwanda, and were in search of something unusual.

Familiar with Cambodia, Indonesia, and Nepal, Myanmar (formerly Burma) seemed like a great adventure motorcycling destination.

They set off from Mandalay and followed a route that took them across the Irrawaddy River to Mindat. From there, they rode through the Nat Ma Taung National Park to Chauk, followed by Bagan, Meiktila, Kalaw, and then to Loikaw.

They then headed back north again, finishing their epic motorcycle journey 21 days and nearly 2 500 km later in Pyin Oo Lwin near Mandalay. Johan and Kim share their photos and advice if you ever want to embark on a similar motorcycling adventure. Over to Johan…



It is nearly impossible to get good English maps for Myanmar – and even more difficult in the remote mountainous regions in the west of the country. The road signs are in Burmese without any English translation. We arranged a local guide, but he disappeared like mist before the sun when we landed in Mandalay.

Our only solution was to purchase a data SIM for our phones, which were attached to our rented Honda 250 cc motorcycles, and we relied entirely on Google Maps for the whole expedition. Even in the thickest jungle, we had strong 4G reception.

As for accommodation, we did extensive research beforehand on clean and safe B&Bs recommended by other travellers. It's advisable to thoroughly study Google's map of Myanmar beforehand and familiarise yourself with the general topography of the country.

The landscape, weather conditions and nature vary significantly from region to region. Keep in mind that Myanmar has three main seasons.

The hottest period is from February to May, when there is little or no rain, and temperatures can rise above 40 °C. The rainy season usually runs from May to

October. The best time to travel through Myanmar is from late October to early February, as the worst of the rain is over and it's not too hot.

The roads can be rough, and you need to know what you're doing if you want to tour on a motorcycle We actually wanted to rent middleweight bikes (690-800 cc) but it was almost impossible – and larger motorcycles are virtually out of the question. The most common type of motorcycles in Myanmar are Chinese 125 cc scooters.

In hindsight, you don't really need a guide for Myanmar. The people, especially in the countryside, go out of their way to help you. Kim was especially adored, particularly when she took off her helmet, as for many locals it was the first time seeing a blonde-haired woman in their lives!

Regarding health and vaccinations, keep in mind that Myanmar is a third-world country. Keep self-care high on your priority list. Wet wipes are worth their weight in gold when there's no hot shower available for days.

It's also fine to ask local villagers for a bucket of clean river water. Just make sure you have vaccinations for hepatitis A & B, tetanus, typhoid, and yellow fever.

Good antimalarial drugs are also highly recommended. We packed a small first aid kit that included broad-spectrum antibiotics and rehydration tablets, as pharmacies in rural areas are scarce.

Remote villages don't have bed-and-breakfast accommodation, so you need to introduce yourself to the local headman and ask if someone might have an empty room. There was always room for us, and you usually pay a very low rate – and sometimes you get a plate of food as well.

Definitely set aside time to visit Inle Lake, one of the largest in Asia. The fishermen on the lake practice a peculiar method of rowing that involves wrapping one leg around the oar while balancing on the other leg on the stern of the rowboat.

On any expedition, especially with adventure bikes, weight is of utmost importance. The lighter you can travel, the better. With a large GS, you can carry around 40 kg of gear, but on the small Hondas, we had to manage with just 18 kg – and that was a month's worth of clothes and gear.

The rental company assured us the motorcycles were relatively new and recently serviced. We therefore decided to limit our tools to the bare basics.

Since locals everywhere ride scooters, we knew every village would have a mechanic to help us. You actually only need to be able to fix a puncture, that's all. Oh, and avoid the dirty fuel sold on the side of the road.

South Africans have no problems to get visas for Myanmar. Book your plane

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tickets to Bangkok, Thailand – once you're there, you can take a cheap regional flight to Mandalay. Upload copies of your travel documentation and vaccination certificates to a digital cloud like Microsoft One Drive or Dropbox so you can request new ones at the South African consulate in Bangkok. Credit cards are only accepted in major cities; therefore, make sure you have enough local currency, the kyat, to pay for food and fuel.

One of the highlights of this route is the golden temples of Bagan which reminded us of the magnificent pagodas of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. It should definitely be on any adventurer's bucket list.

While you enjoy riding on the winding mountain passes in Myanmar, don't forget to try the exotic food, and keep in

mind that everything from fuel to mobile data is significantly cheaper than in South Africa.

Lastly, I would say that Myanmar's culture and natural splendour deserve a four out of five on a scale of beauty. The majestic rainforests, winding mountain roads, and beautiful freshwater lakes, people and architecture are unique.

The only downside is that traffic in urban areas is insane. It doesn't really get better in rural areas either, as few people adhere to traffic rules.

You need to be vigilant at all times. But overall, we would highly recommend a bike trip through Myanmar.